THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO AMERICAN WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

EDITED BY

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SARAH J. BLACKSTONE

Women writing melodrama

From Mary Carr Clarke's early play *The Benevolent Lawyers; or Villainy Detected* (1823), to the many successful novel adaptations by the prolific Louisa Medina, to Pauline Hopkins' *Slaves' Escape; or the Underground Railroad* (1880), to the widely varied work of Francis Hodgson Burnett, whose stage adaptations of her own novels span several decades, American women have been writing melodrama. These women, and others like them, played an important role in the development and success of the mode of drama that had the greatest impact on the American theatre in the nineteenth century.

The study of nineteenth-century melodrama has traditionally been on the fringes of scholarly work. This is due in large part to the concerted efforts of early twentieth-century theatre practitioners to create new forms completely divorced from melodrama, which by that time had held the stage for nearly a century. The writers and producers of the new styles of realism, naturalism, and symbolism had to slay the giant of melodrama in order to gain control of the theatre of the twentieth century. Writers such as George Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill, Anton Chekhov, and Susan Glaspell began writing plays that demanded new acting and production styles. These writers, as well as designers, theorists, and producers, were passionate in their defense of a new aesthetic for the theatre and their arguments against melodrama gained in strength and validity as the old mode of communication failed to respond to the new age. Eventually scholars and practitioners began to speak with scorn of anything thought to be melodramatic, as they simultaneously spoke glowingly of all efforts to create a sense of realism. The final step in this process occurred when scholars began to look for the beginnings of realism in the works of authors who wrote melodrama. Those who showed signs of attempting realistic characters and situations were seen as good playwrights and earned a place in history books and the literary canon while those who wrote true melodrama were seen as lesser artists and were marginalized and forgotten.

The few studies of melodrama completed after realism became the dominant form concentrated on production techniques and theatre architecture, and on the famous actors and managers who worked with the few melodramas that would be remembered. Thousands of plays and playwrights were forgotten, and the scripts destroyed, lost, or collected in archives and forgotten. Few anthologies of even the most famous examples of this genre exist, making the plays very difficult to study.

The marginalization of melodrama as a flawed and failed form has been institutionalized in theatre training, scholarship, and general usage. Introductory theatre textbooks and histories of the theatre tend to vilify the form or dismiss it out of hand, melodramas are rarely produced even in academic settings, melodramatic style is not included in acting classes, and the form has become synonymous with overblown acting and poor writing. The term "melodrama" is defined by *The Random House Dictionary*, a supposedly neutral source, as "a drama in which exaggeration of effect and emotion is produced and plot or action is emphasized at the expense of characterization." The dominant dramatic form and production technique of the nineteenth century has been generally dismissed and essentially forgotten.

Over the past fifteen years, however, melodrama has been revisited by scholars because the plays are full of hints about the social practices and political attitudes of a former century. A number of interesting articles and several book-length studies have been published since 1980 which reconsider the plays and playwrights who worked in this genre. Much of the work completed so far has used the techniques of cultural history to investigate social attitudes and practices as they changed and developed during the nineteenth century.

In order to investigate what the plays have to say about the culture that produced and embraced them it is necessary to understand the genre as it was written and defined in the nineteenth century. These plays were generally scenarios, or outlines, for dramatic action rather than carefully crafted pieces of literature, and are sometimes very difficult to read and understand as written works. However, they should be studied, and their worth determined, by the requirements of the melodramatic genre and not by the standards of modern realism or other twentieth-century forms.

The history of the melodrama as a genre is fairly clear. The first play to be called a melodrama was produced in France in 1800 by René Pixérécourt, and the form was brought to England by Thomas Holcroft when he produced a translation of a Pixérécourt melodrama called *A Tale of Mystery* in 1802. The form swiftly spread, and as Vera Mowry Roberts explains in *The Nature of Theatre*:

> Everywhere – in England, France, Germany, and America – melodrama was the genre most performed during almost the whole of the nineteenth century. It drew the largest audiences, filled the most theatres, and engaged the largest number of actors, not excepting even Edwin Booth and Henry Irving. It reached its peak of popularity about 1880 and since has been in a long, slow decline . . . on the stage of Western theatres. (218)

So exactly what is a melodrama? Determining the answer to this question is not an easy task. The basic definitions of the genre are confusing and contradictory, and most are tainted by negative language and are based on too few examples of the form. The plays that are currently being recovered from archives and other storage places are dizzying in their variety, complexity, and subject matter. What was considered known must be reexamined in the light of new discoveries, and old prejudices and resistances must be overcome. A new comprehensive definition of melodrama must be developed as scholars reach a better understanding of the genre.

However, a few general traits or characteristics can be listed with some confidence at this time. Melodramas were "plays with music" as the term implies. Scholars disagree as to whether each play was accompanied by a complete score as movies are today, but all seem to believe that the moments of highest emotion were accompanied by appropriate music. This music was provided by a piano in smaller venues, but in the best theatres entire orchestras were used. Many melodramas also contain incidental songs and dances, some specifically written for a particular play and others drawn from popular music of the day. *Camptown Races* is an example of a popular song that was simply appropriated by a melodrama author. David Belasco used this song in both *The Girl I Left Behind Me* and *The Girl of the Golden West*. Most melodrama manuscripts that survive do not include their musical scores, but many include the placement, and sometimes the names, of songs and dances as stage directions, others simply call for "specialties" at certain points in the action.

The diction of some melodramas, particularly those written early in the nineteenth century, is extremely elevated to aid the emotional appeal of the scripts. This was expected by audiences in the nineteenth century, but sounds archaic to modern ears. This convention was replaced by efforts to recreate authentic dialects in later melodramas. The dialogue in melodramas often seems stodgy or difficult to understand, regardless of when the plays were written, and this aspect of the style must be overcome to study them.

Melodramas develop the theme of good vs. evil in the way that heroic tragedy developed the theme of love vs. honor. Often defined as plays on

serious subjects with happy endings, melodramas are thought to employ the device of poetic justice, where the good are rewarded and the evil punished on a scale commensurate with their actions. While poetic justice is often in evidence, this part of the definition must be stretched a good deal to cover the contents and endings of many melodramas now being studied. Heroines fall from grace and still obtain their happy ending, as is seen in *My Partner* by Bartley Campbell, where Mary actually gives birth to an illegitimate child during the play and still marries the hero. In other cases, heroines remain true to the values of their culture and are denied a happy ending. In Louisa Medina's *Nick of the Woods*, the star character Tellie Doe dies at the end of the play, receiving only a soulful epitaph from the hero as the reward for her virtuous behavior.

Much has been written about the stereotypical nature of the characters in melodrama who are held to be all good or all bad, and are immediately recognizable by their costumes and demeanor. This part of our current definition of melodrama also needs revision. Every script has an identifiable hero, heroine, and villain, but heroes sometimes fall prey to drink or gambling, virtuous women fall from grace, and villains reveal perfectly good motivations for their evil actions. Supporting characters seem less varied and do tend to fall into stereotypical categories. Most characters are affected by actions outside themselves and make decisions based on the social and moral codes of their day rather than reach any profound individual realizations about themselves, even when they show a mixture of good and bad in their characters. While at odds with the tenets of psychological realism, this does not mean that the plays are lesser works. Several great theatrical forms, most notably the *commedia dell'arte*, have been based on similar casts of recognizable characters who follow a loose scenario based on well understood social codes to tell their stories.

Because character development is generally not a focus of the melodramatic form, the plays are driven by plot and rely heavily on spectacle to elaborate the theme of good vs. evil. Characters face all kinds of obstacles, placed in their way by the playwright, to show their dedication to the requirements of good behavior as defined by nineteenth-century culture. Each act ends with some spectacular effect that leaves the audience anxious to know how the hero or heroine will escape. People are tied to railroad tracks or threatened by buzz saws; buildings or other structures burn to the ground; the mine entrance collapses; or the train runs off the track. Such twists and turns of plotting brought about the colloquial phrase "cliff hanger," and the technique is still used to good effect in television drama. Playwrights often had to manipulate the logic of the plot to bring about the happy ending that was a feature of the form. These contrived endings are

seen by critics as another example of poor construction, although the Greeks often brought on a god at the end of the play to tie up all the loose ends left dangling by the playwright, yet these plays are not subjected to the same criticism.

The effect of melodrama is principally on the emotions rather than the intellect. For this reason, as well as the complicated plots which seem to make little logical sense, and characters that are perceived as stereotypical, the form has long been held to be mere entertainment and not really an art form. Recently scholars have begun to question this judgmental approach and urge a more measured study of the plays and the historical forces that produced them. Bruce McConachie, in his book *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820–1870* makes clear the project facing theatre historians:

> The relevant issue for theatre historians is not whether these diverse melodramas were any good … Nor is it particularly helpful to rail against melodrama for encouraging its spectators to escape from reality … Rather, the question is what types of melodramatic experiences did nineteenth-century theatre goers participate in and what meanings did they construct from them. In a sense, we need to understand not what audiences were escaping from, but what they were escaping to, and what impact this willing suspension of disbelief may have had on their lives … Consequently, theatre historians need to explore what the experience of melodrama did with, for, and to their willing participants. (x)

If the study of melodrama itself is on the fringes of scholarship, the study of women who wrote such plays is even further from the center of theatrical investigation, and study of works by women of color almost completely absent. The work of early feminist scholars was concentrated on recovering the work and lives of women playwrights who were exceptional enough in their careers to gain notice in their own times and to leave a record of their accomplishments, and to include women of note in histories and anthologies. This project grew to include the investigation of known works by women for discussions of women's issues and/or advocacy for women's causes. Many important plays have been rediscovered and analyzed, and important biographical work has been completed as these issues are studied. Scholars are now beginning to study the works of those women who worked in all genres and at all levels of accomplishment throughout American history, and who may have had little recognition or success in their careers.

Over the years the examination of various theatrical documents has produced the names of many women playwrights and the titles of many plays written by women in the nineteenth century. But manuscripts of

many of these plays have been lost, making evaluation of the careers of these playwrights impossible. However, the growing interest in melodrama has led to the rediscovery or reexamination of archival collections that contain many previously unknown works, some by women. For instance, a newly cataloged collection of 2,000 melodramas at Southern Illinois University contains 120 plays written by 91 different women. The earliest was copyrighted in 1878, the latest in 1931. Such discoveries are exciting and will undoubtedly lead to new knowledge about women writers of the nineteenth century.

Research is complicated by the lack of copyright laws during most of the nineteenth century, and the common practice of play piracy that resulted. Many play pirates simply obtained a printed copy of a script, changed the title and/or the character names, and copyrighted the resulting "new play" under their own names. Some of these pirates even sent stenographers to local theatres to copy down popular plays as they were being performed. These practices make it very difficult to determine who wrote what version of what play.

Other factors also complicate the process of attributing work to women authors. Anyone could adapt a novel for the stage, and many versions of certain stories existed, making it difficult to determine who wrote what, and where certain versions were performed. Rosemarie K. Bank has noted that Louisa Medina adapted at least two novels that had alternative stage versions on the boards at the same time her work was being produced ("Theatre and Narrative Fiction," 66–67). Women often used pen names, though rarely the names of men, to hide the fact that they were active in the public sphere, and actors often bought scripts outright from their authors and copyrighted the works in their own names, leaving the actual playwright out of the process altogether. Finally, many of the surviving manuscripts have no authors listed at all, leaving the researcher with the task of consulting copyright listings, which are often unreliable as shown above, and newspaper reviews and stories, when they can be located, for further information.

Biographical information about women of the nineteenth century is also difficult to obtain. Only the most independent and successful women were recognized in their own right and not as the wives or daughters of men. Women found it difficult or impossible to own property or transact business. The theatre was seen as a questionable place of employment, and some women were reluctant to admit their connection with plays or producing companies. Even when the details of a woman's theatrical connections can be discovered, it is often difficult to find even the most basic information about the rest of her life. New research techniques are

being developed to help gain the information needed. New sources of information, particularly public documents, are being examined and old sources are being revisited with women particularly in mind.

As the surviving collections of melodrama manuscripts are mined for information about the nineteenth century, the works of women, including good plays and bad, melodramas and farces, comedies and tragedies, are being found and studied. The difficult work of recovering information about productions and public reception of these plays has begun, and biographical information about the women who wrote them is being extracted from a wide array of sources. We still know disappointingly little and there is much work yet to be done, but interesting facts have begun to emerge.

The lives of several American women playwrights who wrote melodramas have been carefully researched, and copies of their plays have become widely available. June Schlueter, ed., *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon*, Amelia Howe Kritzer, ed., *Plays By Early American Women, 1775–1850*, and Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford, eds., *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850–1914* are excellent sources. A number of essays and individual articles have been published in theatrical journals over the past few years and many of these also contain excellent, if generally scanty, information about women writing melodrama. Some of the data below is drawn from these sources, but I have also included information on women who have not previously been discussed. Their work came to my attention in a large collection of melodramas that has just been cataloged, and in my efforts to understand their work I have discovered a little about their lives which is included here.

Many women who wrote for the stage also wrote novels, biographies, and/or poetry, and many were actors and managers as well. In some cases these women wrote memoirs, autobiographies, or prefaces that give us a glimpse into their lives. Mary Carr Clarke (179?–183?) was such a woman. Much of what we know about her appears in the preface to a book for which she was the ghost-writer. According to Amelia Howe Kritzer, she wrote four plays, three of which were published and two of which are extant (*Plays By Early American Women*, 16). That Mary Carr Clarke wrote *The Benevolent Lawyers; or Villainy Detected* (1823) is undisputed, but whether or not the play received a production is unknown. Nonetheless, it is the earliest known melodrama written by an American woman and the text does survive. Her other melodrama, *Sara Maria Cornell; or The Fall River Murder* had a long run at New York's Richmond Hill Theatre in 1833, but does not survive. This play used the common device of basing a play on a current and sensational murder case. This technique is

still used by television writers, the direct artistic descendants of nineteenth-century melodrama writers. Mary Carr Clarke also wrote popular songs and biographies (Kritzer, *Plays by Early American Women*, 17).

Following close on the heels of Mary Carr Clarke's *Sara Maria Cornell* and perhaps inspired by its success, came Louisa Medina's *Nick of the Woods*, which was produced at the Bowery Theatre in New York in 1838. Medina was the house playwright at the Bowery, and Clarke wrote a biography of its manager, Thomas Hamblin, as told by Elizabeth, his first wife. It is quite likely that these women were familiar with each other's work, if not actually acquainted with one another. According to Rosemarie Bank, Medina may have written as many as thirty-four plays, although only eleven have been definitely identified as her work ("Theatre and Narrative Fiction," 55). Three of her plays were actually published, and two of these are classic melodramas. Both *Nick of the Woods* (1838) and *Ernest Maltravers* (1838) contain information from the author about specific scenic and costume requirements, and about musical accompaniment at particular moments in the plays. *Ernest Maltravers* contains several long songs, and *Nick of the Woods* contains several spectacle scenes. One of these shows a character going over a waterfall in a blazing canoe, and another features characters clinging to a bridge dangling over a precipice.

In 1878 Mrs. B. E. Woolf copyrighted a play entitled *Hobbies; or the Angel of the Household*. This seems to have been her only published work, and little is known about its production history. The play takes place in the household of Major Garroway Bangs and is a series of comic situations instigated by preparations for an amateur theatrical. The play is of very poor quality, relying on bad puns and silly disguises for its humor. The villainous Major Bangs is easily fooled and punished by the young lovers, and never poses much of a threat. The only scene of any interest features a series of impersonations of famous melodrama actors by the hero. Mrs. Woolf, whose maiden name was Josephine Orton, was an actress with the Boston Museum Stock Company at the time she wrote the play, and it may be a piece performed at one of her benefit performances.[1] This theory is supported by the many incidental songs and dances sprinkled through the play, all assigned to the leading lady, Minnie Clover. Mrs. Woolf's husband, Benjamin Edward Woolf, was the conductor of the orchestra at the Boston Museum, and later at the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, and is credited with writing at least sixty light operas and plays during his lifetime.

Another actress/singer of this period, Genevieve Ward, is listed in many sources as the author of the sensational melodrama *Forget Me Not*, which she first presented in 1879. She performed the play more than two thousand

times during her career, making the heroine Stephanie her signature role. References to her performances in the play appear throughout George C. D. Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage*, almost always heaping praise on Ward as "impressive," "an admirable actress," "excellent as always in the role," and almost as frequently declaring her supporting cast as inadequate to the task. Buried in these references is the information that Ward did not, in fact, write this popular play. Odell states that Ward had to go to court for the rights to the play, which she had purchased outright from the author, Palgrave Simpson. After winning this court battle, Ward copyrighted the play in her own name, and her performance of the role of Stephanie in England, America, and Australia from 1879 until 1887, led to the mistaken belief that she was the playwright as well as the actress who created the role.

One of the African American women authors known to have written a melodrama in the nineteenth century is Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins. Only recently recognized as a prolific writer of novels, short fiction, and essays during a literary career that spanned thirty-six years, Hopkins wrote, produced, and starred in her melodrama *Slaves' Escape; or the Underground Railroad* in 1880. The only recorded performance of this play took place in Boston at the Oakland Garden on July 5, 1880. The company called themselves Hopkins' Colored Troubadours and featured not only Pauline Hopkins, but her mother and stepfather as well. The play received a few favorable reviews, but was not performed a second night. It is known that Hopkins later revised the play, changing the title to *Peculiar Sam; or The Underground Railroad*, and changing the number of acts, but no other information survives. Hopkins toured with the family group for at least two years after her play was produced and, according to Jane Campbell's article on Hopkins in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, she was referred to as "Boston's Favorite Soprano" (183). One other play was written by Hopkins but never published. Called "One Scene from the Drama of the Early Days" it was a version of the story of Daniel in the lions' den. Pauline Hopkins' literary career is being reexamined and her novel *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, which was originally dismissed because of its melodramatic qualities and its concentration on domestic issues, is being studied again due to the new interest in nineteenth-century publications.

Two years later, in 1881, Martha Johnson copyrighted her play *Carrots; or The Waif of the Woods*. This frontier melodrama tells the story of a young, red-headed tomboy, known to all as Carrots. The villain is determined to take Carrots out of the woods and make a lady of her. In Act III he says, "The prettiest and freshest thing I have seen in a woman in

years. Only let me get her to town and completely in my power and the rest will be comparatively easy. The wild bird of the forest may fret against the gilded bars of her cage for a while, but in the end she will take it kindly, they all do, these women." In the course of the play, her ability to shoot a gun, fight hand-to-hand, and use her wits to avoid the villain stand Edith (Carrots) in good stead. Eventually the hero wins out over the villain and the two lovers settle down in the woods to live happily ever after. Nothing is known about the author of this well-written melodrama and Odell makes no mention of New York productions. Careful research is needed to discover more about Martha Johnson.

Actress Rosina Neuville, who was known for her appearances with such greats as Edwin Forrest, the elder Booth, and the father of E. H. Sothern, spent much of 1886 touring in a melodrama called *The Boy Tramp; or The Maniac Mother* with her son Augustus. All references refer to this as "her play" and the play was copyrighted in her name. It is possible that this is another case of a play purchased by an actress from the playwright and then referred to as her own work, but no evidence to that effect has been discovered. Odell lists a number of performances in New York during 1886 and he has nothing good to say about the play, calling it "their ancient thriller," "the abiding horror," and stating that New York has "for some time been eager to escape" the play. Whoever the author may be, it would seem that this was not a popular melodrama. The play is not very well crafted, either. The story is extremely convoluted, a failing that is compounded by the way the author has thrown in the many specialty songs and dances at any point where the plot runs into a dead end. Slapstick humor is included at inappropriate times and the ending is almost impossible to understand. Nonetheless, Rosina Neuville made her living in the lead role of this play on the stages of New York for well over a year.

Recently the work of Frances Hodgson Burnett has been rediscovered. New versions of *The Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden* have brought this prolific writer of the nineteenth century to the attention of late twentieth-century readers. Remembered now for her stories for children, and the stage and film versions of those stories, Burnett also wrote adult fiction during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of which she adapted for the stage. Born in 1849 in Manchester, England, Burnett's family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee in 1865, and she spent most of her life in the United States. She was married twice and had two children. Her experience with stage versions of her novels began with the adaptation of her very popular novel *That Lass o' Lowries* in 1878. Other adaptations followed. *A Lady of Quality* (1897) featured a heroine who was reared as a boy and killed her husband with a riding whip. A more

gentle heroine is found in her play *That Man and I* (1904), which is an adaptation of her novel *In Connection with the De Willoughby Claim*. Both *Phyllis* (1889) and *Nixie* (1890) are plays in the melodramatic form. Her famous children's tales use the devices of melodrama, particularly the theme of good vs. evil, and spectacular effects, to create exciting and engaging theatre. Early in her career, Burnett was considered a serious artist and was compared to George Eliot. Her success with more popular forms, however, led to a reappraisal of her talent by critics. She began to be seen as a formulaic writer who cared more for money than for art. As scholars revisit her works in the light of the new interest in melodrama, perhaps a more balanced critique of her work will emerge.

Another successful woman melodramatist was Madeleine Lucette Ryley, who wrote, according to her *Variety* obituary, a score of successful plays in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Ryley began her career as a comic opera comedienne, and was married to English comedian John H. Ryley, but she seems to have left the stage to concentrate on writing sometime around 1888 or 1889. Her two best-known plays are *Christopher, Jr.*, which starred Nat C. Goodwin, and *An American Citizen*, which was a vehicle written specifically for John Drew and Maude Adams. Neither of these plays follows the strict melodramatic form as they are really comedies, not serious plays with happy endings, but many features of both plays are based in the melodramatic tradition. Characters fit the stereotypical categories of melodrama, and plot is the central focus of both plays. A kind of poetic justice operates in the plays as the comic resolution brings the world of the play back into balance. As might be expected from the work of a comic opera star, there are musical interludes throughout both plays.[2]

Mrs. Romualdo Pacheco married her Mexican-born husband in 1863. Her maiden name was Mary McIntire and she was known as a playwright at the time of their marriage. Romualdo Pacheco was the governor of California for a year (1875) and eventually became a Congressman and an American minister plenipotentiary (diplomatic agent) to the Central American republics. Little has been discovered about Mrs. Pacheco, but her plays *Loyal to Death*, *Nothing But Money*, and *Incog* were popular melodramas that received good reviews. Further research should reveal more about this playwright as she and her husband led a very public existence, and documents regarding their lives are sure to exist in the records of California and the US Congress.

Melodrama did not disappear with the advent of the new century. Many of the writers of the Progressive Era wrote in this genre as well. Most of these plays have been ignored or scoured for evidence of realism, but few

have been studied for the information they reveal about the changing values of the time or for their adherence to what was by that time an outdated set of dramatic conventions. Success in the commercial theatre was seen more and more as a failure of artistry and popular writers were not admired by critics. Melodramas of this period, by such well-known figures as Mary Roberts Rinehart, Marguerite Merington, and Angelina Grimké, have yet to be studied as examples of the genre. Such a study might lead to a clearer understanding of the changes in society during this turbulent period.

It is clear from this brief discussion of only a few of the women who wrote melodrama that there is much work yet to be accomplished. The difficulties in locating the names of women playwrights and their plays, finding manuscripts and biographical information, and overcoming prejudices against the melodrama have kept scholars from making much progress in the study of nineteenth-century women playwrights. Recent discoveries in manuscript collections and the methodologies of feminism and the new historicism have led to an exciting new area of research. Future work in this area should lead to new and interesting information that will help to rewrite the history of the nineteenth-century American stage.

NOTES

1 Benefit performances were common in the nineteenth century. The performer, or a group of performers, received all the profits from an evening's performance. The material for the performance was chosen to showcase the particular talents of the performer being benefited.

2 The most recent and thorough study of the work of this playwright is the unpublished dissertation "New Women Dramatists in America, 1890–1920: Martha Morton and Madeleine Lucette Ryley" by Sherry Engle, which was completed in December 1996 at the University of Texas, Austin.